First Lessons with Zero Beginners

At some point, probably early in your career, you will be faced with the problem of teaching a class of Zero Beginners: students who know no English. Most new teachers find this a very daunting prospect! (In fact, it is not particularly difficult to teach Zero Beginners - and it is usually a lot of fun, partly because the students are almost always very motivated and enthusiastic.) So, to help, we are including this unit which provides a lesson plan for two initial 60-minute lessons with a class of Zero Beginners; as you will see, the plan for the first lesson is extremely detailed. We also include simple worksheets that you will need during the first lessons.

Some points to bear in mind

1. Most students, even in Zero Beginner classes, already know a little English. Even students who have never studied English before will probably know some internationally-used "English" words (such as "taxi" and "radio") although they may pronounce these very differently.

2. Most students, even in Zero Beginner classes, will know our script. However, they will rarely know how to pronounce the letters of our alphabet.

3. In your first classes, you will need to rely heavily on mime, gesture and visual aids.

4. When introducing sentences (e.g., "What's your name?" or "It's a ---"), you need to treat them as whole expressions rather than trying to clarify the function or meaning of each component word.

5. Your priorities in your first two lessons are:
   - Finding out your students' names.
   - Getting them learning (how to say) the letters of the alphabet.
   - Presenting and practicing some basic vocabulary items (partly to facilitate the later introduction of grammar structures).
   - Starting helping the students to get their mouths around English sounds that they have never heard or tried to pronounce before.
   - Making students aware of the importance of word stress.
   - Introducing the students to pairwork, which may well be new totally to them.

6. Remember to speak reasonably naturally but not fast or indistinctly.
Your First Lesson with a Beginner Class

1. Point to yourself and say "I'm (name)." Get the students to repeat only your name. Write your name on the board. See if the students can say the individual letters in your name; if they cannot, drill the names of the letters.

   **If the students do not understand:** Show a picture of Elvis Presley and say "Elvis." Do the same with pictures of e.g., Marilyn Monroe, Michael Jackson.

2. Go to one student and say: "I'm (name. What's your name?" Get him/her to say "I'm (name)."

   **If the students do not understand:** Point at the student and say some local names with a rising intonation; e.g., Sergei? Natalia? Alex? Then go back to the start of stage 2.

3. Ask several students "What's your name?" and help them to respond with "I'm (name)."

4. Then do oral modeling and drilling: "What's your name?"

5. In open pairs, get some students to ask and answer "What's your name?" and "I'm (name)." After each answer, elicit the spelling onto the far right of the board and have the class practice saying the letters. Do this by saying "How do you spell (name)?" and miming writing.

   **If the students do not understand:** Say some letters with a rising intonation and write them on the board.

6. Convert the list of names into a substitution table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What's your name?</th>
<th>I'm</th>
<th>Sergey.</th>
<th>Anna</th>
<th>Ivan</th>
<th>etc.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

   Make sure they realize that "I'm" goes with every name.

7. Get the students to copy down this table and walk around checking their spelling and writing.

8. Point to a chair and say "It's a chair." Now do the same with some other objects shown on the worksheets for the second lesson: a pen, a table, etc. (This is to let the students hear that "It's a" appears every time.)

9. Go back to the first noun (chair) and do oral modeling and drilling with "It's a chair." Do some chorus drills and then every individual student.

10. Repeat the process with each of the other words. While you are doing this, start saying "What's this?" as you elicit each response. (This starts the students hearing and understanding "What's this?" without really even noticing it.)

11. Model and chorus/individual drill "What's this?" "It's a chair."

12. In open pairs, have some students point to a known object and ask another student "What's this?" Have the other students answer "It's a (object name)." Help anyone who has a problem.
13. **Elicit the sentences and write them on the board in a substitution table:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What's this?</th>
<th>It's a chair.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>pen.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>book.</td>
<td>etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Make sure they realize that "It's a" goes with every noun.

14. **Get the students to copy down this table and walk around checking their spelling and writing.**

**Note:** This lesson may take more than an hour if you are dealing with a large class of true Beginners. If you are going to run out of time, simply cover fewer nouns. Then start the next lesson by dealing with the rest of the nouns on the worksheet.

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**Your Second Lesson with a Beginner Class**

1. **Review everything you covered in the first lesson, and introduce and drill any of the nouns you did not manage to cover in the first lesson.** (Remember to write these on the board and to elicit and drill the alphabet letters in them.)

In the review, include open pairs question and answer practice.

2. **Provide closed pairs oral practice with "What's this?" / "It's a (object)." through an information gap based on the worksheets on the next pages.** You will need to act out the directions and an example before putting the students into pairs:

   Hold up the two halves of a worksheet so the students see there are two different papers. Give the sheet with pictures on it to a student. Point to the first bubble on your sheet and ask the student "What's this?" Point to his first picture and prompt him or her to answer "It's a board." Then mime writing "board" in the bubble.

3. **Hand out the two halves of Worksheet A, one to each student.** While the pairs are working on Worksheet A, go around and help any students who are having problems.

4. **Go through the same process with Worksheet B.** Obviously, this time you reverse the order of the halves: A student who had the bubble half last time now gets the picture half.

5. **After this, you can either introduce some more nouns or could introduce "What are these?" and "They're (plural forms of the nouns already covered)."**

From this point onwards, you should be able to follow the units in any good Beginner coursebook.
A First Lesson with a Higher Level Class

Most teachers feel nervous about their first lesson with any new class. To help you feel more confident, this unit provides a lesson plan for a first lesson that should work well with a new class at any level from Elementary upwards. The basic lesson takes 60 minutes, plus some optional written homework. If your first lesson is 90 minutes, you could include the written activity in the lesson.

Apart from helping you to break the ice with a new class, this first lesson will:

1. Help you find out about your students and vice-versa.
2. Help the students find out about each other.
3. Provide useful review and oral practice (repetition and communicative/personalized Practice and Production).
4. Help you to start to see the students' strengths and weaknesses.
5. Introduce students to closed pairwork and information gap activities if they are not already familiar with such activities.

Your First Lesson

STAGE 1 (Open Class)  Tell the students to ask questions to find out as much about you as they can. Prompt them by saying: "For example, ask: my name, where I come from, where I live now, my age, if I am married ..."

Let students ask the questions without worrying about accuracy, as long as you can understand the questions. (If you want to correct, use "gentle correction": don't mention the mistake but just repeat the student's sentence in correct English.)

Say each answer, and then write 1-word or 2-word summaries of each answer on the board.

If the students run out of questions, be ready to prompt them: e.g., "Ask me what I like to do in my spare time." "Ask me what music I like."

When you have 6+ answers on the board (or 10+ answers with a high level class), go to Stage 2.
STAGE 2  (Open Class)  For each answer on the board, elicit one appropriate, correct question. (You may well have to help the students to produce these, particularly if it is a lower level class.) Do oral modeling and drilling of each question. After drilling each question, elicit it onto the board and let students copy it down. Then erase the board.

STAGE 3  (Open Class)  Tell students to work in pairs, speaking only English. They have to ask their partner questions like the ones they have just practiced together about you. Give them a simple worksheet to work from:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student: ______________</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>From? __________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married? _____________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lives with? ____________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likes? ________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dislikes? ______________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Make up your own sheet. Include perhaps 6-7 items for an Elementary class through perhaps 12 items for a high Intermediate class.)

Tell the students to write down only short answers not complete sentences.

STAGE 4  (Closed Pairs)  Students work in pairs asking and answering questions while you go around the class monitoring their work and helping if necessary.

STAGE 5  (Open Class)  Ask each student to tell you and the class one thing about his/her partner. (Be careful not to ask questions here. Instead say, "Tell me one thing about ----." This leads students naturally into producing full sentences rather than just giving short answers.)
STAGE 6 (Open Class) After or during Stage 5, focus on a couple of common mistakes or mistakes with something that you drilled earlier. Elicit and briefly drill the correct versions.

STAGE 7 (Homework) Tell each student to write a brief description of his/her partner, based only on the answers on their worksheet grid.

To show them what you want, do an example with them. Elicit onto the board two sentences about you and write them on the board. (Or you could hand out a previously prepared description that you have written about someone, so that the students can use this as a model for their writing.

Note: If you prefer and have time, the written descriptions could be done in class, with you monitoring the work and helping individuals. In this case, take in the descriptions at the end of the lesson and mark them at home. Give them back, with corrections noted, in the next lesson.